



Waitakere Children and Family Violence Project

Yates, Deborah (2013) Researching our response to children exposed to family violence: A final report

Executive Summary

The Waitakere Children and Family Violence Project (originally The Schools Project) has been funded by the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) and managed through the WAVES Trust. Begun in September 2011, it was the result of concerns within the local family violence sector about the response to children exposed to violence (CEFV) between adults in their family¹. The intention was to work with schools, using a mix of research methodologies with a grounded theory approach, to ascertain their response at the time and to find out how they could be helped to build on that response.

It soon became clear, however, that the problem was well beyond the capability of schools to remedy and the research was extended to encompass wider consultation. By tracking the reporting pathways (see Appendix 1 Pathways Flowchart) and through this consultation it was discovered that the community-wide response to children exposed to family violence is far from adequate, with large numbers of children precluded from accessing help. This is thought to be primarily due to systemic issues related to the focus on reporting to the statutory child protection agency, Child Youth and Family who, in response to overwhelming numbers of notifications have, in partnership with the New Zealand Police, developed a process of triage and high thresholds that attends primarily to the most at-risk children's immediate safety. Coupled with this, relationships between key parties are fraught with issues and sector silos mean there is little dialogue between them. Several key agencies, such as schools and child and adolescent mental health services, are not obliged to recognise the issues of family violence and trauma thereby limiting children's opportunities to disclose or gain access to help. Programmes that are in place are either limited or underutilised. Most social services are yet to become trauma-informed and practitioners often have little training in the potential effects of family violence and trauma on children. Furthermore, training in child therapy appears to be in short supply in New Zealand.

Responses to a survey of 29 young adults who had been exposed to family violence as children hauntingly corroborated these findings. While very few told anyone, 21 would have liked to tell a safe adult. Although only four received help, all would have appreciated some form of support.

A literature overview was also conducted on the needs of CEFV and strategies and therapeutic modalities demonstrated to meet these. This search highlighted the need for trauma awareness and recovery and earlier collaborative intervention, amongst other things. In the New Zealand context, the Government's Children's Action Plan and Investing in Services for Outcomes may potentially lay the foundations for a serious rethink and revamp of child protection, with a focus on outcomes for children. However, childhood exposure to family violence and the effects of trauma need to be recognised as major contributors to ongoing social issues such as mental health and suicide, substance abuse and crime and ongoing violence, if these are to be tackled with any success.

The Waitakere Children and Family Violence Project, with the backing of WAVES personnel, is proposing a local professional collaboration, designed to develop a multi-sector effort to upskill and inform practitioners and resolve and provide options to the systemic barriers to responding to children and young people in Waitakere who are trapped in both the violence perpetrated by the adults in their lives and the aftermath of that violence.

¹ As distinct from those who are direct targets of violence, although these are frequently the same children. The project initially used the term 'children who have witnessed family violence' (CWFV) but more recently uses 'children exposed to family violence' (CEFV) as it is more inclusive of past and current experiences. The word 'violence' is intended to cover all forms - physical, sexual, psychological/emotional, financial etc.